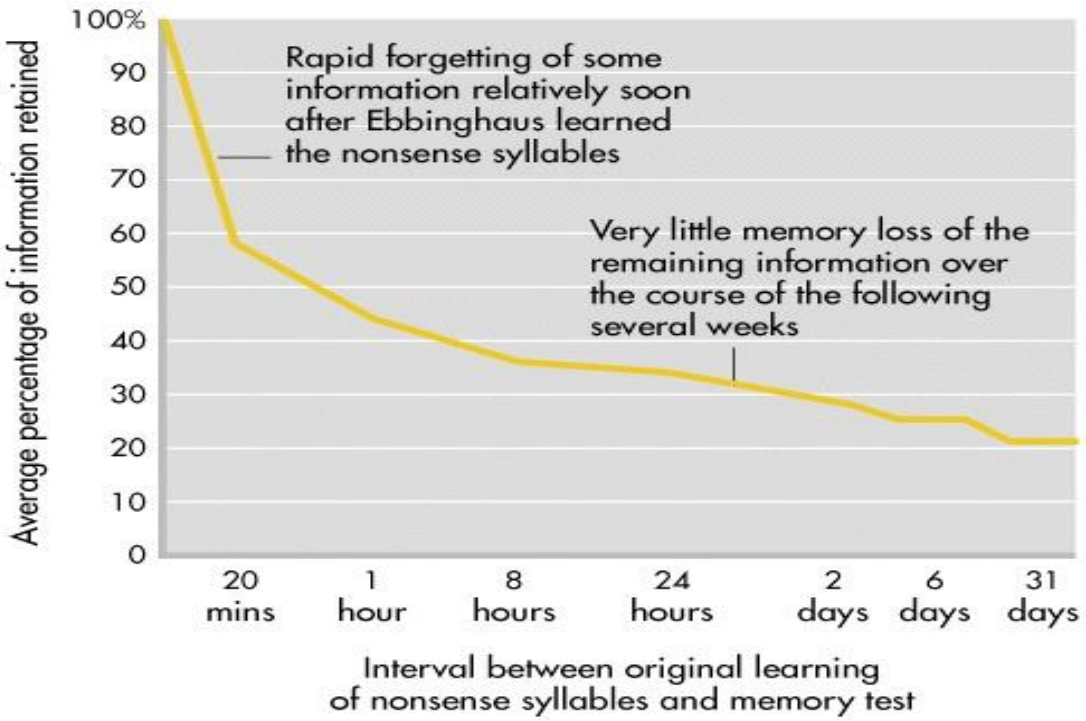
FORGETTING

Why do we forget? There are two simple answers to this question. First, the memory has disappeared - it is no longer available. Second, the memory is still stored in the memory system but, for some reason, it cannot be retrieved. Forgetting information from short term memory (STM) can be explained using the theories of trace decay and displacement. Forgetting from long term memory (LTM) can be explained using the theories of interference, retrieval failure and lack of consolidation.

The Forgetting Curve



Hermann Ebbinghaus first began to study forgetting using nonsense syllables. Nonsense syllables are three-letter combinations that look like words but are meaningless (ROH, KUF).

SHOUT
SHARE
IT

Forgetting theories

- **Interference Theories**

Memories interfering with memories". Forgetting NOT caused by mere passage of time, caused by one memory competing with or replacing another memory.

Two types of interference

1. **Retroactive Interference**

   When new memory interferes with remembering old information.

   Eg: when new phone number interferes with ability to remember old phone number.

2. **Proactive Interference**

   Opposite of retroactive interference. When an OLD memory interferes with remembering NEW information

   Example: Memories of where you parked your car on campus the past week interferes with ability find car today

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- **Motivated Forgetting**

Undesired memory is held back form awareness

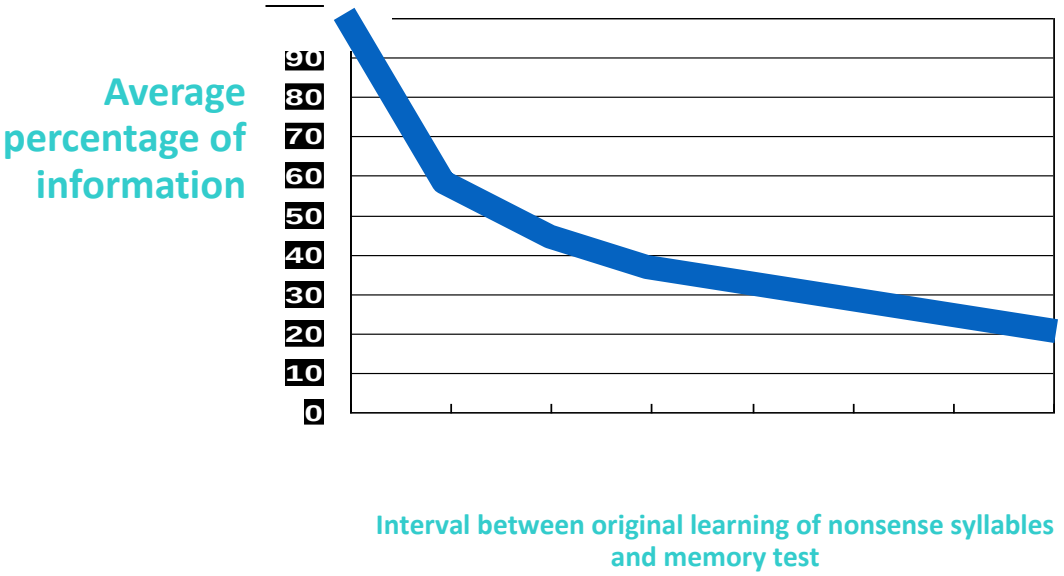
- Suppression—conscious forgetting
- Repression—unconscious forgetting (Freudian)

Motivated forgetting is what Freud referred to as repressing memories. According to Freud, there are times when an event or an action is so painful that we can't deal with the memory of it, so we repress the memory completely.

By pushing the memory into the subconscious and actively repressing it, we are unable to recall the memory.

So in essence, motivated forgetting is purposeful forgetting.

- **Trace Decay Theories**



Memories fade away or decay gradually if unused, time plays critical role in this. Ability to retrieve info declines with time after original encoding.

This explanation of forgetting in short term memory assumes that **memories leave a trace in the brain**. A trace is some form of physical and/or chemical change in the nervous system.
Trace decay theory states that forgetting occurs as a result of the automatic decay or fading of the memory trace. Trace decay theory focuses on time and the limited duration of short term memory.
This theory suggests short term memory can only hold information for between 15 and 30 seconds unless it is rehearsed. After this time the information / trace decays and fades away.

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- **Retrieval Failure**

  Retrieval failure is where the information is in long term memory, but cannot be accessed. Such information is said to be available (i.e. it is still stored) but not accessible (i.e. it cannot be retrieved). It cannot be accessed because the retrieval cues are not present.

  When we store a new memory we also store information about the situation and these are known as retrieval cues. When we come into the same situation again, these retrieval cues can trigger the memory of the situation. Retrieval cues can be:

External / Context - in the environment, e.g. smell, place etc. **Internal / State**- inside of us, e.g. physical, emotional, mood, drunk etc.

There is considerable evidence that information is more likely to be retrieved from long-term memory if appropriate retrieval cues are present. This evidence comes from both laboratory experiments and everyday experience. **A retrieval cue is a hint or clue that can help retrieval**.

This theory is often referred to as ***cue-dependent forgetting*** and is a useful explanation of why we sometimes fail to retrieve information even when we're sure we know the information.

Forgetting in STM

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Trace Decay: Unless information is refreshed or rehearsed will spontaneously fade or decay over time.

Displacement: Only a fixed number of slots in memory capacity. New information will displace old when capacity is reached.

Encoding failure: Because of displacement, this information never reaches the LTM.

Forgetting in LTM

- **Interference:** More information will be stored and become confused together.
- **Retrieval Failure:** Information may be *available* but temporarily *inaccessible*
- **Motivated forgetting:** we may actively work to forget memories. Two basic forms are
- **suppression-** a conscious form of forgetting**.**
- **Repression**- and unconscious form of forgetting

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